

And Breathe Normally from Iceland: Two women in conditions “when everything is going wrong”

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Written and directed by Isold Uggadóttir

And Breathe Normally, a film from Iceland, was released in that country in early 2018. It is now available on Netflix. It is earnestly recommended.

Written and directed by Isold Uggadóttir, who lived in New York for 10 years and has made a number of short films, *And Breathe Normally* takes up—unusually—both the condition of refugees *and* the condition of the working class in Iceland.

One of the strongest features in Uggadóttir’s film, which sets it apart to a certain extent, is the degree to which Kristín Thóra Haraldsdóttir, in a fine performance as Lára, an economically hard-pressed young woman on her own with a son, allows the extreme tension of her situation to play on her features. More generally, there are not that many films in which a director captures accurately and artistically the relentless, “everyday” pressures of working class life.

One of the most successful American works along those lines is Michael Curtiz’s *The Breaking Point* (1950), with John Garfield, loosely based and, in fact, an improvement on Ernest Hemingway’s 1937 novel *To Have and Have Not*.

Drab housing blocks in bleak weather. A woman, Lára, in a supermarket lacks the cash to pay for all her items. Her credit card is also declined. She is obviously harassed. Attempting to carry on normally and cheerfully, she gives in when her young son, Eldar (Patrik Nökkvi Pétursson), reminds her she promised him a cat. At the animal shelter, Eldar wonders about existence in a cage.

Lára ignores the mailbox, for good reason. It is full of overdue bills and threats from collection agencies. Cellphone calls from the landlord too are avoided. She

begins a training program to become a border patrol agent at the nearby international airport. Eager to impress, Lára points out to her trainer that he has let through a woman with a questionable (in fact, forged) passport. She thereby lands the document’s owner, Adja (Babetida Sadjo), trying to reach Toronto with her sister and daughter (who both make it through Icelandic immigration), in the soup.

Adja, from Guinea-Bissau in West Africa, receives 30 days in jail and then finds herself stuck in a crowded, chaotic refugee detention center near the airport while her application for asylum in Iceland is considered. How long will she have to stay there? No one knows. “It’s just the system.”

Both women are gay, although the filmmaker does not make a meal of the matter. Adja’s claim for asylum is based on her sexuality and the tragic fate of her lover back in Africa. Lára has a girlfriend, the mother of one of Eldar’s schoolmates, but she hardly has any time for love and affection.

Lára and Eldar are forced to move out of their apartment. She tells him they are going on a “mystery adventure trip.” They begin living in their car, even as he carries on at school and Lára continues her apprenticeship at the airport. It’s nearly always raining. Eldar muses about wearing shorts in a warmer climate. His mother replies mildly that she doesn’t know anything about that, “I haven’t been to another country.”

And Breathe Normally makes references to Lára’s previous difficulties, including a drug habit and losing custody of Eldar for a while. In the supermarket again, she requests a number of free samples (chicken with a “special sauce”) for her “other kids.” She and Adja

eventually meet up. The first time, Lára offers the African woman a ride in the inevitable downpour. Does Adja recognize her as the border agent who spotted her fake passport? Presumably, although it's never alluded to.

The detention center is located in an ugly industrial district, the sort of area where benevolent governments around the world dump refugees and other victims of their cruel policies. Adja is desperate to reach Canada and see her daughter. "I have to do something."

Adja comes to realize that Lára and Eldar are homeless. In a touching and also amusing turn of events, the refugee makes room for the pair in her room at the detention center. In certain ways, they are worse off than she is. Adja begins taking Eldar to school, although their communications are very limited.

The asylum seeker's legal process reaches a denouement. Uggadóttir films an especially effective scene on a public city bus. The late afternoon autumn darkness, the wretched weather and the blinking, flashing lights of the traffic correspond to Adja's misery. Lára then suggests a plan. . . .

Filmmaking in the Nordic countries—Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden—has not been promising in recent decades, with certain important exceptions (Sweden's *Sami Blood*, for example). Social indifference or complacency has tended to dominate. Personal idiosyncrasy and "extremism," sometimes reduced to mere quirkiness and eccentricity, are poor substitutes for taking a painstaking look at the world. The filthy and ideologically disorienting role of the region's Social Democratic parties, right-wing defenders of the profit system, and their "left" hangers-on has undoubtedly played a part in this.

Iceland, characterized by "repeated volcanism" and "geothermal phenomena such as geysers," has too often served as a mere exotic backdrop for international and domestic artistic filmmaking. The country's picturesque and unusual landscape is presumably supposed to fill in and make up for the dramatic and social elements absent from the films in question. Too many "misfit moods" in too many "darkly comic" and "seductively strange...road movies," which don't add up to much.

Uggadóttir rightly pours cold water on this. She told an interviewer from the *Reykjavik Grapevine* that "We often have this romanticised image of Iceland—the

tourist brochure image with black sands and waterfall and the midnight sun—and it all exists, but that's not the everyday life for many Icelanders." She wanted to "poke fun at the cliché image that we've seen so much of and show what's going behind the scenes."

The writer-director went often to the area and photographed it. "I wanted to get locations that were true and real so that the logic of the story would also be really accurate, geographically speaking. . . . I'm not a fan of the classic romantic style of filmmaking. I'm drawn to rawness, to social realist filmmaking, and to films that feel true and authentic." This seems a thoroughly healthy response.

The *Grapevine* website observes that *And Breathe Normally* "is different from everything else we've seen from Icelanders so far. It's not a documentary, but it's challenging—it's mature in its depictions and heart-wrenchingly real." If this is so, then again, Uggadóttir deserves credit. She convincingly brackets the fate of a young woman in Reykjavik and that of a refugee from Guinea-Bissau. In every important way, the film makes clear without ever having to say so, the women are equals and that creates the basis for an elemental, but significant solidarity.

The conditions depicted are both particular to Iceland, and universal. For masses of humanity, life offers increasingly unbearable pressure. The title refers to the safety instructions on airplanes, as the director explained to *Cineuropa*, which "tell you to first secure your own mask and then your child's—and breathe normally. It's such an ironic thing to ask people to do when everything is going wrong. But we keep insisting on it."

A reviewer at *Cineuropa* observed that the "current socio-economic environment is utterly hostile for anyone in need, and Uggadóttir captures that anxiety." Quite right, and quite important.



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